

Romaine, Mazzei Join Fire Islanders, Fire Officials in Demanding Landline Phone Service Be Restored to Fire Island

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Pictured left to right are Councilman Tim Mazzei, Brookhaven Fire District Commissioner and Suffolk County Fire District Council member Eugene Petricevich, Supervisor Ed Romaine and Fire Island resident and Ocean Bay Park Fire District Commissioner Steve Placilla.

Farmingville, NY - Brookhaven Supervisor Ed Romaine and Councilman Tim Mazzei today joined Fire Island residents and fire officials in voicing public safety concerns about Verizon's plans to replace their wire landlines with their wireless Voice Link service on anything but a temporary basis.

They joined a host of elected officials raising the same concerns, including NY Attorney General Eric Schneiderman, who has charged that Verizon is attempting to move customers onto the wireless network in other areas of New York State.

On May 16, 2013, the Public Service Commission (PSC) conditionally approved the part of Verizon's tariff applying to Western Fire Island "because it is critical to that service be available on Fire Island immediately. "The Commission's May 16th Order limited Verizon's substitution of Voice Link for wireline service to western Fire Island, to enable evaluation of this unproven technology on a pilot basis. The Commission directed Verizon to submit by November 1, 2013 a comprehensive "report evaluating the provision of Voice Link service on Fire Island" so that this pilot can be weighed in conjunction with the public comments before the service can be expanded elsewhere. Since the May 16th Order, Verizon appears to be attempting to usurp the PSC's authority by installing Voice Link in other parts of the state (Catskill, with other reports that they seek to advance Voice Link in Buffalo and Watertown) without a tariff and before the report evaluating Voice Link on Fire Island is complete.

"Abandoning landlines in place of this wireless alternative poses a risk that our residents can't afford to take," said Supervisor Ed Romaine. "With a host of differences from traditional landlines, our residents and businesses could find themselves without operating alarm systems, reliable communication during blackouts, or access to the 911 system. That simply cannot be allowed to happen."

The transition to Verizon's Voice Link service creates a host of issues for both fire island residents and its local businesses," noted Councilman Mazzei - whose district covers Fire Island's effected areas. "Voice Link is a voice only-product. Consequently services like broadband, faxing, home medical monitoring and credit card processing go

unsupported."

Supervisor Romaine called upon the PSC to take immediate action to require Verizon to cease all Voice Link deployment except for the defined limited western Fire Island pilot. The Supervisor also demanded that the PSC and Verizon to share with the public and the Town of Brookhaven the full evaluation of Voice Link before any decision to expansion such service is made and before any decision to make such a system permanent on Fire Island.

For more than a century, New York and federal regulators have required phone companies to provide traditional landline telephone service to all customers within their territory under a Universal Service policy. In doing this, the phone companies have received subsidies to serve customers in high-cost rural or remote areas, and provide service at reasonable rates.

Replacing landline networks with the wireless Voice Link service prevents residents and businesses from being able to use wire-dependent services such as fax machines, alarm systems, medical alert devices, and Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) Internet access. In many instances, there is no FiOS or cable modem Internet providers available, leaving those who rely on these services no alternative if switched to Voice Link. The wireless service may not be compatible with certain monitored home security systems, placing homes and businesses at greater risk from flooding by burst plumbing, fire or burglars. While landline customers whose service is suspended for non-payment can still reach a 911 operator in emergencies, suspension of Voice Link stops all service. In addition, Voice Link's backup battery only allows a brief period of use during blackouts, when the need to communicate is critical - unlike landlines, which continue to function even when customers lose electric power.

"As President of the 36 Fire Districts in the Town of Brookhaven, I believe abandoning land lines in specific places such as Fire Island will add a potential risk to loss of life in fire and medical conditions," said Eugene Petricevich, President of the Brookhaven Town Fire District Officers' Association. "Specifically, when wireless is not working due to power outages for long periods of time as we have experienced in the past due to hurricanes and nor'easters. The volunteers of this Town are here to protect our residents."

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